

Welcome to Humanities Colloquium on '*The art/craft of biography*'

**Rhodes University
CEC Centre
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On behalf of Rhodes University, welcome to this Faculty of Humanities colloquium on *The Art/Craft of Biography*. And to colleagues from other universities and institutions welcome also Rhodes, to iRhini/Grahamstown, and the Makana District.

Compared to scholars at universities in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban, for transport, logistic and costs reasons our scholars have to work especially hard to convene colloquia, conferences and seminars at Rhodes University.

Yet we do so with considerable success, and the impressive and exciting array of speakers and participants that have been secured for this colloquium bears testimony to this. This, I believe, is a consequence of the quality of our scholars and their scholarship and an acknowledgement that at Rhodes there are outstanding scholars that take seriously the challenge of advancing understanding through an engaged and committed yet dispassionate and critical scholarship.

An especial note of appreciation must be extended to Prof. Fred Hendricks:

- Firstly, for persuading an outstanding collection of speakers to participate in this colloquium and providing Rhodes academics and students the opportunity to be part of what I am convinced will be an intellectual and scholarly feast
- Secondly, for his prescience that the proliferation of biographies on South Africans and by South Africans calls forth a necessary intellectual and scholarly conversation *the art and craft of biography*

- Thirdly, for the insight and skill with which he conceptualised the overall theme of this colloquium and defined a pertinent range of objects
- And finally, and not least, for being able to pull all of this off without having to at all make any claims on the Vice-Chancellor's discretionary strategic funds!

At the age of 21 I spent an exhilarating week captivated by Isaac Deutscher's three-volume masterpiece on Leon Trotsky. No doubt many of us have been in recent times been similarly captivated by the narratives that have been penned by those that are with us this evening.

Deutscher has written that he had to "drag out" Trotsky "from under a mountain of dead dogs, a huge load of calumny and oblivion". Furthermore, that he had to "assail (his) mountain of dead dogs" in conditions in which momentous events "were about to strike", some cults "appeared as indestructible", and stigmas attached to some "seemed indelible" (1959:v)¹. Change the events, the cults and stigmas, substitute the Twentieth Congress of 1956 with Polokwane and we may well be describing recent and contemporary South Africa.

Rightly scornful of hagiographies and cult-making, Deutscher's trilogy draws salient connections between history and politics, history and biography and politics and biography. It also attempts to capture the actor as 'thinker' and 'fighter', with "real stature and strength" but also blemishes and "weaknesses", with "extraordinary power, fertility and originality of...mind" but also 'fallibility', as "heroic character" but also irresolute, indecisive, faltering and boggling (1959:ix).

This, however, is to merely raise some of the issues pertinent to biographies. Over the next 24 hours this colloquium has as its objects other important issues: the method of biography,

¹ Deutscher, I. (1959) *The Prophet Unarmed - Trotsky: 1921-1929*. London: Oxford University Press

biography in history, biographies of struggle and the personal and the political.

I am confident that this will be an immensely stimulating and productive colloquium that will generate insights and ideas that can vitally inform future biographies. I have an especial interest in this regard, for after a frustrating year of negotiations with a donor I am now hopeful that in the next month Rhodes will secure a sizeable grant to enable us to commission Steven Friedman to undertake over the next three years the production of an intellectual and political biography Harold Wolpe.

Eric Hobsbawm has usefully cautioned that

Political pressures on history...are greater than ever before...More history than ever is today being revised or invented by people who do not want the real past, but only a past that suits their purpose (2002:18-19).

This is a timely warning about a creeping amnesia about and growing sanitization of our 'real past'. In as much as critical historians are needed to safeguard us against sanitized histories, critical biographers are vital to protect us from sanitized biographies. Both are indispensable to ensure that we cultivate understanding of the 'real past'.

In closing, I wish to express my deep appreciation to all the biographers that will address the colloquium; the discussants who have volunteered to engage with the work of the biographers – it is most gratifying how many are Rhodes scholars; and to all the participants who will no doubt contribute in numerous ways to the colloquium. Finally I must thank Fred Hendricks for his efforts, Karen Kouari for her organisational and logistical contributions and Charmaine Avery and her staff for the catering.